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Writing Sample

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Vladimir MARTINOVSKI
Poems and prose

A LOOK

Several years
before he died,
my grandfather, one morning,
vanished suddenly.

We looked everywhere.
At all our relatives. In
the market. In the park.
At all his friends.

The next day he
turned up smiling.
He had hopped a bus,
traveled ten hours

to Dubrovnik. There
he spent just two-three hours.
Then, he hopped
the first bus back.

What did you do
those two-three hours?
We kept repeating,
like parrots.

I wanted, he said, just
to cast one more
look at the sea.
Just one more look.

AFTER THE DANCE

After the dance
we look toward
the sky:
those are not the trails of
planes, but the traces of our
fast movement.

And those new waves
upon the lake...the wind did not make them. It was
the forces that throughout the night
danced through us and
now slowly spread across adjacent galaxies.

Translated from the Macedonian by Christina E. Kramer

NEW CONSTELLATIONS

1.

We spent the first part of the night
Piecing together new constellations

When I saw in the sky a "Sleeping swallow"
You hastened to draw the constellation of the "Pillow"

When you discerned the constellation of the "Bent Tulip"
I gathered a few stars to prop it up

When I saw the glistening of the "Eel" constellation
You told me that the whole sky is one big ocean

When you chanced on the constellation of the "101 Pearls"
I whispered: the galaxies are like oysters

Whenever we saw new flocks of stars
We rushed to find them heavenly trees so they could rest

2.

And when we finally found homes
For all the stars, comets, meteors and constellations

We decided we can take our deserved leave
And rest for the remainder of the night

3.

Next morning began as any other morning: we looked at each other,
As if we knew not of any new constellations

A STAR IS GONE

(Annual inventory)

The Moon
has a few more wrinkles
than last year

- But she doesn't try to hide it
unlike most of us -

The lake has given birth
to hundreds of
new clouds

- After straying for a long time
one of them came back yesterday -

The mountain, it seems,
has escaped the city by
two or three feet

Let's join it!

A star is gone from the sky,
the one I showed you
last year

THE CITY IS FOLLOWING US

This city shall follow you
Constantine Cavafy

We finally understand that we can't escape the city.

When we headed for the mountain
hundred new buildings and houses sprung up
at its foot.

We gave up climbing it, because we knew
the city would catch up with us
on the way to the top, hell, they have already placed
the woods in museums that are not open on holidays.

When we headed for the airport we realised
the runway is passing through the centre of the city
making it pointless to fly: we have a return ticket
and in every city we go we'll be welcomed by the same
shops employing many of our fellow citizens.

Though everything else may seem different,
the moon among the skyscrapers shall be the same.

We'll probably be taken from the airport to the hotel
by a cab driver from our former neighbourhood,

who, no doubt, will tell us that the world is just one big city.

THE LAKE EXPANDS

This is no ordinary ebb and flow;
while some lakes recede from
 geography and flow into history, one lake expands daily.
It expands a foot in height and width, even more in depth.
 The divers have given up on all attempts to reach its bottom,
fearing they'll get to the center, or even to the other side of earth.
 Archeologists have started to boast that they
are sure to find there the first home of the first people.

Yet, further than the deep, expands
the endless silence and the endless blue;
 all the things spilled in there, never stop it
from being even more blue, more clear, more transparent every new morning.
 The blue of the lake expands together with the
blue of the frescoes and the skies. It expands together with the silence.
 No matter how loud, noisy or blaring we are in the night,
the lake gets even more quieter and calmer each morning. The waves
 have become silent, quieter than the beating of
a sleeping heart. The silence is expanding to the other side of earth.

LIGHT YEAR

From yesterday till today
I seem to have lost six or seven hairs
And probably as many have turned gray
But hardly anyone will notice the change

Listening to Mahler from yesterday till today
Has made a profound change in me
As though I have lived through
A whole light year

REFLECTION

Our whole lives we've been taught
That light travels fastest
To convince us, we are told of the thunder
"First you see it and only then do you hear it"

The thunders I hear now in the choral pieces
of Arvo Pärt make me reflect on this again:
I hear them first, and then I'm illuminated within
By this strong and gentle light

PERFECT PITCH

I know that I can't boast of perfect pitch,
That when I sing, it's often out of tune
That when I play, I sometimes miss a beat

Yet I also know that when I hear Bach, the rhythm of
My heart falls into tune with my thoughts,
And the compositions inside continue
To be played with absolute precision
As though being timed by a deft
Conductor with a perfect pitch.

REQUIEM

We place freshly picked flowers.
We pour the best spirits buried in the ground
We whisper, barely to be heard, all the things that
we couldn't dare tell them before out loud

Composers know well that they are the most loyal,
Numerous and attentive listeners
Only for them do they save the most poignant notes,
Intoxicating as the freshly picked flowers and
The best spirits buried in the ground.

BETWEEN TWO DUTCH MUSEUMS

Rectangular fields full of
Tulips in all the colours of the rainbow,
Framed by canals
As if dug following
A pattern of a
Mondrian painting
(only a single cow
Dares to disturb,
For a moment,
The perfect symmetry
Of lines, shapes and colours)

At the entrance of the town
An old wicker chair
Is left sitting in front of a leaning house
(so someone can take it to his home
And paint on a canvas,
Or if short on time and colours
At least take a photograph of it,
But without using a flash)

Covered in diffused red light
(as if they are daughters of
Rembrandt's Susannah)
Girls both flaunt and hide
Their nudity
From the shop windows

All of a sudden everything
Resembles a stop-frame
People acting as sculptures (for a few quid)
Someone this morning has carefully set up
An installation of parked bicycles.

Then, it all turns slowly
Into a slow replay of a photo-finish
Behind every corner
A new performance on a bicycle happens
The girls with the pearl-earring
Carries a large easel on her shoulder
With a huge open canvas (like a sail)
And is sailing among the canals on a rusty bicycle
An old man with a red turban on a tricycle
Drags behind him an enormous wooden case
Full of flour, turpentine and oil
Over the pavements,
Like flyers with a warrant for a serial killer
Float the traces of his eighty self-portraits
(but, who should we look for:
The child, the young or old man?)

You can hear a choir of children's voices
With museum headphones, running on rollerblades
Repeating the lessons about the Old Masters:
Rubens knew seven languages...
He had seventy seven apprentices...
Vermeer died poor...
He only did two paintings a year...
Even the local baker
owned two of his canvases...
In the left corner of a Rembrandt painting
There is a hand writing down verses by Homer...
Homer, too, had seventy seven apprentices...
He wrote only two cantos a day...
Vincent wrote to Theo that he
Can't sleep because of the prints by Hiroshige
The baker died poor, too...

Together with the voices,
The echoes of the paintings
Multiply through the town

On Boulevard Walter Benjamin
Everyone is wearing sunflower ties
And t-shirts with reproductions of

“The Potato Eaters”, “The Night Watch”,
“The Anatomy Lesson” or “The Starry Night”
In René Magritte’s “Alley
A man with a top hat
(which most people think is high)
Repeats all day “this pipe is not a pipe”
In Franz Hals Square all the street musicians
Hold their instruments just like their ancestors

On a stone bridge a girl is reading
A message on her cell phone
With the same frown and wonders
Like the women reading letters
On the paintings of the Flemish Masters

Though surrounded by all these images, yet I’m relieved:
Today is the day when museums are closed.

COMING TO TERMS

*If you follow the stars
you can't miss the sky*
Dante

If I follow the ants
I will be able to find the crumbs
from yesterday’s lunch,
yet I will not be able to hear
the cricket’s song in the ant hill

If I follow the streams
I will one day reach the sea
or maybe even the ocean,
yet the water flowing
there will not be as clear

If I follow the snowflakes
I will one day merge into
the ever present white,
yet I will have to
come to terms that it will all melt.

If I follow the stars
I will one night
reach the sky’s end,
yet maybe there
I will miss the ground.

SICK LEAVE

*A healthy person has thousand wishes.
A sick - only one
Chekhov*

I don't have to
run like a panther,
 swim like a dolphin,
 hop like a rabbit –
I am satisfied if my knee does not hurt when I walk.

I don't have to
sing like a nightingale,
 howl like a cheetah,
 move stones like Orpheus –
I am satisfied if my throat does not hurt when I talk.

I don't have to
drink expensive drinks
 kept for ages in oak barrels
 nor herb potions with fancy Latin names –
I am satisfied that I can drink this cup of tea together with your smile.

PORTRAIT OF A POET WITH AN UMBRELLA

*Based on the painting
Portrait of a Poet
by Vane Kosturanov*

Some say that a poet has no need for an umbrella
He is sure to leave it somewhere
and be soaked to the bone

Some, yet, say that he brings it along
to shield himself from some other rain
that not everyone can feel in their bones

An invisible rain of words
for which there is no more place
in his future poems

STAGE PROPS

(An Actor's Monologue)

This morning all objects seem to me to be props
For plays that are yet to arrive
The lawnmower, the saw, the sprayer for the crops
All still appliances waiting to be brought to life

Looking at the axe leaning on the old pear tree
I realize that it is there for the trunk to be knocked off
And I can hear the voice of the old director:
At the end of the play the gun must go off!

But today for the first time I dare not to play my part
I'm tired of serving the same old delusions
For the first time I also seem to pray in my heart
For some other actor to handle their sharp protrusions

I'm exiting the stage, myself I'll spare
The sound of someone savagely sawing the old pear.

MEETING DEADLINES *(Label on the lid of a can)*

Meeting deadlines
We have stopped stopping to see the moon set
And watching the sun rise

Meeting deadlines
We have stopped knowing How to tell apart
The song of the birds

Meeting deadlines,
We have stopped stopping to greet
Our neighbors

Meeting deadlines,
We have started to eat food past its deadline
Without being able to stop.

REVERSE PROFILE *(Errata)*

An
error has
sneaked by
in
The Book
of Marriage:
the registry number
of the bride
lacks a digit

An
error has
sneaked by
in the Book

of Birth:
the last name
of the infant
is missing
a letter

It's said
that
even in
the Egyptian
Book of the Dead
a reverse profile has
sneaked by,
that even in the
Collected works of
the most wise
strange things slip by

It's said that
we all sneak by
with our
own mistakes:
each with its own
invisible
Errata

Translated from the Macedonian by Milan Damjanoski

TRANSFORMATIONS

When you're gone, I suddenly turn into a sunflower without the sun,
In a book without letters, home without doors, rain without drops,
A double bass with no strings, a tricycle without the front wheel,
A clock without hands, a verse without an ancient metric foot,

Into chocolate without the cocoa, a city with no boulevard,
A giraffe without a neck, an orchestra with no conductor,
A condor without feathers, a street without a footway,
Into a sculpture with neither a head nor a pedestal.

When you're gone, I'm a nut without the kernel,
A bee without a drop of honey, or a selfish
Little cricket that's misplaced its violin.

And when I'm with you, I'm merely
A man who conceals so readily
All the things he used to be.

YOU LOOK LIKE RAIN

You look like rain! Like the rain we were waiting for with chapped lips and an empty glass in hand. Like the rain bringing joy to everyone and everything, everything breathing, everything with and without eyes and wings.

You look like shamanic delight. You look like an exciting murmur, a long-awaited sound I awake to and know that it pours when we most need it.

You look like the sky pregnant with clouds, in four colours and countless shades. Like the sky with barely visible transitions between dark-white and sparkling grey, between purple and light blue.

You look like a passage from dry into moist, from unbearable distress to bearable sadness, from an interrupted tale to an endless saga.

You look like the rain falling on the forest that's just begun to burn. You look like the rain we've been waiting for centuries with dry, chapped lips that cannot let out a word. So I rush with my empty glass.

IN THE LAND OF CAROUSELS

In the Land of Carousels you get the dizziest if you're standing still. In the Land of Carousels the name of your beloved (even though you haven't told even your best friend) is already on the lips of the ticket salesman.

In the Land of Carousels five generations may spin on the same carousel since carousels live much longer than people.

In the Land of Carousels everyone asks for winter in the summer, and when it's snowing, they long for the sea.

In the Land of Carousels the easiest trade is to turn to another part of the world and fly away for good.

In the Land of Carousels the hardest trade is to love: your beloved escapes your sight as the astronaut's meal in zero gravity.

In the Land of Carousels I buy another ticket for another ride. I wait in line hoping you haven't left the Land of Carousels.

HURRY UP AND WAIT!

Hurry to get to the park and wait there for the trees to blossom. Hurry up to get into the concert hall and wait for the conductor to wave his baton. Hurry up to get on the plane and wait for the pilot to get the permission to take off. Hurry up to catch the first bus from the airport to town and then wait for the tram that will take you to the square. Hurry up to get on with your heavy trunks and wait for your ticket to be stubbed. Hurry up to get to the square in time, stand behind the monument and wait for me there. Hurry up and wait!

I might be a bit late.

WHEN YOU ARE SLEEPING

When you are sleeping, I'm always awake, as if I live in the other hemisphere. When you are sleeping, I'm always awake, even though I close my eyes first. When you are falling asleep, my eyelids always open, as if it's dawn already.

When you are sleeping, I regularly pry open the roof on all four sides so that you may watch the planets and the stars on all four corners of the sky.

I play a lullaby on all philharmonic instruments when you're restless, and when you're sound asleep, I nail new paintings on the wall to surprise you when you awaken.

When you are sleeping, I regularly keep watch so that a comet doesn't fall through the open roof.

(When you are sleeping, I pay attention to every dog's howl.)

And when you wake up, my eyes always close and I fall asleep for a minute. It's not that I am tired – I just want you to watch me sleep a little.

I like it even more when you wake me up and call me sleepy-head.

A LADYBUG ON A POMEGRANATE PIP

A year ago to date I first entered the tattoo parlour. God only knows how many times before I had reached for the door, but found no strength to go in. I would peep bashfully into the latest tattoo sketches in the display window, check who was working, and then either continue down the street or, more often – go to the pastry shop next-door. So I learnt half of the Chinese ideographs *accidentally* passing the shop window.

I don't know what came over me that day, as if the too familiar, fear or shame – who knows what it was – had gone into thin air. And when my mind is set on something, there's no stopping me.

For years before I had been scribbling on tons of paper, pads, canvases or walls, and that day my body too became a large enough base for artistic expression. I say *large* only as a reminder to my admission of the number of times I frequented the pastry shop.

*

If I'm not mistaken, the first thing I wanted tattooed on me was a ladybug on a pomegranate pip. But, I don't know why, my old indecisiveness returned, and I quenched that desire.

- Do I know you from somewhere? – asked my never-ending crush, holding the latest tattoo catalogue in her left hand. – What would you like?

- We went to the same primary school, we went to the same high school, I went out where you did, I followed you everywhere, even when I was with other girls, all I ever thought about was you. I have tried everything to forget you, in vain. How could you remember me when I'm three times the man I used to be...

I never said uttered any of this, of course, I blushed a little and asked her to tattoo a nocturnal butterfly on my left shoulder. How typical! – muttered some guy waiting his turn.

My left arm seemed to be moving far more quickly and easily than the other one, so a couple of days later I asked her to *land* another butterfly on my shoulder. Naturally, I *happened* to drop by when she was working! She asked me if it hurt. I'd gladly drink poison from your hand, I thought.

- It hurts a little, but I'll take it in the name of art – I mumbled smiling like an imbecile.

Soon my tattooed butterflies needed flowers and at the door I immediately asked her to plant my skin with several roses, petunias, crocuses, evening stocks, marigolds, primroses, gerberas...

- I'm not a freaking florist!

(I know, you went to art school and graduated with honours. Your picture was in the papers. After several failed attempts for a solo exhibition you ended up in this tattoo parlour...)

- Feel free to draw a whole meadow, it doesn't matter which flowers you put – I addressed her with a compound sentence for the first time in my life, blushing as a ladybug.

* *

When it rains, it pours! A couple of days later I asked for other insects and animals to fly and crawl all over my back: silkworms, crickets and dragonflies, maybugs, rare spiders, ermines and black widows. In the next stage I wanted the bugs to be accompanied by various angles, as in one of my favorite albums, *Angels and Insects*. Through strange associations my huge gut became the home of mythological creatures from all parts of the world and names of important people – to me alone – but written in Egyptian or Chinese ideographs. One day I slipped her name transcribed in Arabic. She placed it perfectly: right above my heart! While she carefully embroidered the strange symbols, I blushed so much that all tattoos changed color. I resembled a ripe pomegranate ready to burst. As usually, she noticed nothing! She drew routinely and decisively, waiting for her shift to end.

Every day on another part of my body new miniature drawings appeared, cartoon scenes, anagrams, rebuses, quotes from my favorite books, forgotten sayings and encrypted messages in variegated ink. Even in the days when I didn't visit the tattoo parlour I had a feeling that new drawings and creatures emerged on every patch of my skin: underarm, behind the ear, between the toes.

*
* *

While laying comfortably on my stomach, pretending to dose off, I once heard her whispering to her coworker:

- I throw this chubby in a tub of formalin, I could display him in the contemporary arts museum. I drew so much, I could have prepared three solo exhibitions by now...

*
* *
*

I stopped going to the tattoo parlour. A couple of days ago, during her shift, I ran into some new chatterbox who immediately barked at me that my *body artist* had decided to leave town for good and pursue happiness elsewhere. Overseas probably...

I cut him off, pretending not to care, and nonchalantly asked him to tattoo a ladybug on a pomegranate pip. Even more nonchalantly he replied that there was no more room on my skin.

*
* * *
*

I slammed the door and ran. I know I've never explained why I wanted a ladybug on a pomegranate pip, but I'll explain later. I can't talk now. I'm in a hurry!

In a couple of minutes a new exhibition opens at the museum. How do I know? One of my *early* sculptures is to be displayed. I don't care. I'll throw it out, change into my birthday suit and take its place.

I have her nametag in my hand: I'll put it on the pedestal, where my name is now. If there are cameras – and there certainly will be – I'll say I am her masterpiece.

And when I set my mind to something, there's no turning me back.

I wouldn't be surprised if they showed me at the Met some day...

Be that as it may, I hope she'll hear the news, wherever she may be.

Translated from the Macedonian by Kalina Janeva